

Sam Skingle

1703792

The Politics of Food

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Eggs as a 'Food Scare': A Commentary

This report will be an investigation into the case of eggs as a 'food scare' in the United Kingdom and will illustrate how, through the lens of modernity, certain processes can readily facilitate the emergence of 'food scares' in contemporary society. Thus, this investigation will address notions such as 'risk', and how this, as a reflexive mechanism, produces an environment whereby 'food scares' can emerge and endure. The materialisation and impact of the 'Salmonella outbreak' in eggs in late 1980's Britain will be utilised as the framework for this report, forming the investigatory narrative in which to begin.

Key Words: Food Scares, Risk, Reflexivity.

In order to explore eggs as a 'food scare' in the United Kingdom, it is essential to offer a brief historical summation of this particular 'food safety' issue so that this phenomenon may be contextualised within the investigatory scope of this report. In 1988, then junior health minister, Edwina Currie, made provocative remarks regarding Britain's egg industry, claiming that national egg production was widely contaminated with Salmonella bacteria and that vulnerable groups of people should avoid eating undercooked eggs (BBC, 1988). Although based in truth, as links between Salmonella bacteria and poultry was previously known (M. J. Smith, 1991), the inflammatory nature of the claim proved to be extremely controversial. This sparked outrage and condemnation from the farming community and the Ministry of Agriculture, which ultimately would lead to Currie's resignation (BBC, 1988).

Owing to the resulting controversy and backlash, the story was widely covered in the media, and consequently, sales of eggs in the United Kingdom went into sharp decline. Commenting on this, Sarah Nettleton (1995), describes how this controversy generated much concern around the so-called “egg crisis” (citing Fowler, 1991), and it would be many years before egg sales would eventually recover (Nettleton 1995, p56-57). Evidently, the public and political fallout from the ‘egg crisis’ prompted a change in food policy regarding eggs and would lead to the introduction of the British Lion Mark, aimed at improving safety within the egg industry (BBC, 2017). The long lasting repercussions from the events of the 1988 Salmonella ‘outbreak’ were significant, as it would take a further thirty years for British eggs to be officially declared as ‘safe’ and virtually free from Salmonella. In October 2017, the Food Standards Agency declared ‘British Lion Mark’ eggs as ‘safe’ to eat for all groups, as the ‘risk’ that eggs could be contaminated with the bacteria was now so remote it was no longer a concern (BBC, 2017).

So what exactly defines the notion of a ‘food scare’, and what mechanisms exist that allow issues regarding ‘food safety’ to manifest themselves as such? There is a dynamism between these two questions and to fully address the former, first the latter must be considered. A key process of modernity that can be applied in this context is the notion of ‘risk’. In developing the concept of the ‘risk society’, Ulrich Beck (1995), describes how there now exists a contemporary environment of anxiety and risk, one that lies “in the wake of the autonomised dynamism of modernisation” (1995, p5). Beck is suggesting here that part of the modernisation process, being the ‘obsolescence of the industrial society’, is the emergence of the risk society (ibid). Writing in *Risk Society* (1992) Beck states:

“The concept of risk is directly bound to the concept of reflexive modernisation. Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. Risks [...] are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt.” (Beck 1992, p21)

Beck then, is describing how ‘risk society’ is a reflexively driven consequence of modernity, existing as both an agent and symptom of a climate filled with dangers and subsequent anxieties, and concurrently as a way of legitimating and prompting response to its own influence. Here, ‘risk’ does not merely exist in the residual sense, in the instance of threats or dangers that indeed exist but largely escape public and/or political concern. Rather, risks can come to dominate public and political spheres and, due to the complexity of reflexivity, become increasingly difficult to predict and control (1995, p5). In this regard, Beck is thus illustrating how ‘risk’ can become both socially and politically ‘problematic’.

The concept of risk then, is contextually significant when addressing the notion of ‘food scares’. The ease with which dangers surrounding the safety of food can manifest themselves as elements of ‘risk’ is apparent. However, the important consideration in this regard is the distinction between aspects of ‘food safety’ and what constitutes a ‘food scare’. There are numerous examples of documented ‘food safety’ issues, such as BSE, the horse meat scandal, even meat and milk contaminated with radioactivity from the Chernobyl accident. But what substantiates these as ‘food scares’ from other potential risks regarding food safety and production? Martin J. Smith (1991) suggests the distinction lies not with a single event, but through a multitude of factors involving food retailers, manufactures, scientists, and the consumer, all now having a more prominent

communicative platform (p250-252). Perhaps most importantly here is the function of the media, to quote Smith:

“Once food [becomes] a political issue, it [is] difficult to exclude groups particularly with widespread media attention.” (M. J. Smith 1991, p251)

Thus, when ‘food scares’ reach the media, they can invite significant levels of response, both politically and publicly, most often resulting in a change to food policy (Nettleton 1995, p56-57).

Viewing ‘food scares’ through the lens of Beck’s ‘risk’ based perspective then, the unease and readiness to embrace the ‘scare’ develops from deep anxieties within risk society itself. The ‘fear of the unknown’ appears, as aspects surrounding food manufacturing and processing are largely hidden from the public gaze. Therefore, related anxieties easily manifest themselves within this vacuum of knowledge. Beck would categorise this as “the return of uncertainty”, whereby recognition of unpredictability regarding threats from ‘techno-industrial’ development prompt self-reflection bound to ‘risk’. In this case, social conflicts now become problems of ‘risk’, rooted in ‘fundamental ambivalence’ (1995, p8-9).

To conclude, the 1988 ‘Salmonella outbreak’ exemplifies the relationship between ‘risk society’ and ‘food scares’. The political actions of Edwina Currie and her controversial statement regarding Salmonella led to widespread public concern and media interest, which in turn would lead to a collapse in egg sales in the United Kingdom, and subsequent changes to food policies. Indeed, the ‘risk’ of Salmonella bacteria in British eggs and

poultry was known about before the 'egg crisis', however it was not until Currie's controversial statements that these 'risks' fed into the public sphere through becoming a much wider political issue. Thus, the complex reflexive nature of 'risk society' articulates how this particular issue of food safety was transformed into a 'food scare', reflexively feeding back into the political sphere and ultimately initiating changes from within. Here, it is perhaps fitting to bring this commentary to a close with one last quote from Ulrich Beck:

"In risk issues, no one is an expert, or everyone is an expert, because the experts presume what they are supposed to make possible and produce [...]. The Germans see the world perishing along with their forests. The Britons are shocked at their toxic breakfast eggs". (Beck 1992, p9)

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